Patrick OBrian: The Making of the Novelist, 1914-1949 by Nikolai Tolstoy

Wonderful Work!

A complex, layered portrait of the man considered by many to be the greatest British novelist of the twentieth century. This is the story of Patrick OBrians life up to his decision to move to Collioure in the south of France. His childhood; his precocious writing success; his sailing experiences; and the truth behind his first marriage, divorce, and name change are set forth with candor and sympathy. Along the way Nikolai Tolstoy reveals the seeds of inspiration that would one day lead to comparisons to Jane Austen and even Homer. Tolstoy was OBrians stepson, and their acquaintance lasted forty-five years. He stayed with his mother and OBrian at their French home and was a frequent correspondent with the reclusive author, discovering facets of his character and creative genius that were hidden from others. Over the years he accumulated a vast collection of the authors papers, correspondence, and notebooks, many of which are reproduced here. On the basis of this trove of original material, Tolstoy has written the definitive biography that OBrian and his admirers deserve. 16 pages of illustrations.

My Personal Review:
This is an extremely well written summary of the first 35 years of Patrick OBrian/Richard Patrick Russ/Richard Rosss life. Nikolai Tolstoy does a superb job mapping the parallels between the unattested portions of his step-fathers life through a detailed analysis of OBrians 3rd and autobiographical novel, Richard Temple. Tolstoys interpretations is measured and credible. While critical of certain points in Dean Kings portrait, he avoids getting excessively embroiled in their differences.

What I still am at a loss to understand is exactly what prompted OBrians name change at the end of WWII, particularly given that Richard Russ operated as Richard Ross while working with what appears to have been one of the propaganda branches of British Intelligence during WWII.
Tolstoy teasingly describes how Richard Russ a.k.a. Richard Ross had assumed the identity of an academic with a PHD from an Italian University. Was Richard/Patrick escaping these lies?

The other area that remains unexplored is Patrick OBrian’s craftsmanship. Tolstoy certainly makes clear that Russ/Ross/OBrian leveraged many of his life experiences when writing his short stories (and many themes reappear in the Aubrey/Maturin series). But how did a largely uneducated writer evolve such a potent writing style. Tolstoy himself is no mere scribbler. The writing is very clear and moves the reader effortlessly along. But what of his subjects beautiful style? Tolstoy apparently had access to manuscripts from this earlier period. Do they tell us anything?

Finally, I believe that this book will help readers look at the characters in Aubrey/Maturin series, especially the female characters, in a new and richer light.

Tolstoy is currently working on Part II of his OBrian biography.

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